

LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY



COMMISSION ON HISPANIC AFFAIRS

CHA Testimony on Eliminating State-Funded Prenatal Care for Undocumented Women

Relevant Bill:
ESSB 5404
Primary Sponsor:
Senator Rossi

Good afternoon, Madame Chair, members of the committee. My name is Antonio M. Ginatta, and I am the Executive Director of the Commission on Hispanic Affairs. The Commission is tasked by the people of the State of Washington with advising the Governor, the Legislature, and state and local agencies on issues of concern to the Latino community.

The issue of benefits received by undocumented residents in the State has garnered much attention during this legislative session. Efforts have been made to eliminate eligibility for the Basic Health Plan for undocumented families. Bills have been proposed to eliminate driving privileges for undocumented workers. Long-term resident students of the state struggle to access in-state tuition so as to be able to prosper in our economy.

Today is no different. Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5404 would eliminate state-funded prenatal care for undocumented expectant mothers. The Commission would like to express its grave concern about this measure.

Let me attempt to dispel two pervasive myths that cloud the undocumented immigrant issue. First, that immigrants are somehow attracted to particular states because of greater governmental benefits. And second, that the costs of serving the undocumented population are borne by legal residents of the state.

The first argument, that immigrants travel to particular US states with greater benefits (sometimes referred to as the "immigrant welfare magnet" argument) is not supported by the research. The Urban Institute studied the issue and reported that the states with the highest immigration rates in 1995-1999 were not the ones that extended the most generous benefits. Surveys of immigrants show that there are two dominating forces in promoting immigration: the availability of work and reunification with family.

The second argument, that the costs of serving the undocumented population are only borne by legal residents of the state, is also misleading. Undocumented immigrants pay taxes in our state. They pay taxes every time they buy something in the state. They pay taxes on property they may own. They have federal income tax withheld from their paychecks, which they usually never see again. They have Social Security taxes withheld from their checks, which are also lost in a suspense file.

We are here to speak for the over 6500 children that are going to be born as US citizens this year in our state, but who would be ineligible for prenatal care under this proposal. A study in 2000 by the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology showed that “undocumented immigrants who do not receive prenatal care are nearly four times as likely to have low-birth weight infants and seven times as likely to have preterm infants as those who obtain care during pregnancy.”¹ Additionally, the study showed that “each dollar cut from prenatal care could cost taxpayers [in California] up to \$3.33 more in neonatal care.”²

Prenatal care for all of our state’s expectant mothers is wise and economically-sound policy. Cutting off such care for undocumented expectant mothers is, as many have said before me, penny-wise and pound-foolish.

This measure will result in some citizen children being borne healthy while other citizen children will be more at risk for birth complications and long-term health problems.

These children are innocents; they did not choose to violate the law by crossing the border. Don’t make them bear the burden of a troubled federal immigration system. Thank you very much for your time.

The people of the State of Washington have tasked the Commission on Hispanic Affairs with advising the Governor, the Legislature, and state and local agencies on issues that affect the Latino community of the State. The Commission meets with members of the Latino community six times a year throughout the state to gather information as to their concerns.

¹ International Family Planning Perspectives, Vol. 32, No. 3 (May/June 2000)

² Ibid.